

Should B.C. build pipeline? Don't ask Singh; NDP leader has refused to take official position on controversial project

The Toronto Star

January 25, 2020 Saturday

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A6

Length: 955 words

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Dateline: OTTAWA

Body

There's a reason Jagmeet Singh won't take a clear stand on the Coastal GasLink, a 670-kilometre natural gas pipeline project in northern British Columbia that has galvanized opposition from Indigenous groups and environmentalists.

In his own words, it's complicated.

The province's NDP government has insisted the project will go ahead, sparking objections from former NDP MPs Romeo Saganash and Svend Robinson that it is violating the spirit of its legislation to enshrine the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in law.

Singh has not shared in that criticism. Nor, however, has he rejected it.

"There's a lot of complexity to the situation," the federal NDP leader said when asked this week about protests in B.C. and calls from hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en nation to halt construction of the pipeline.

"The (UN) declaration and reconciliation are all very complex things," Singh said. "The path that we need to walk as a society, as a country, to reconciliation, to justice, is a difficult path. But we need to walk it."

Although those words might sound like a classic politician's dodge, there may be good political reasons Singh wants to avoid taking an unequivocal stand in this pipeline fight. There is peril at every turn, said Bill Tielemans, a former B.C. NDP strategist. Environmentalists and defenders of Indigenous rights would be incensed at his support for the project, while workers in the province's liquified natural gas sector and NDP Premier John Horgan might be disappointed if he were to call for construction to stop.

Add the fraught question of who gets to speak for Indigenous nations - hereditary chiefs from a traditional governance system, or elected band councils created through colonialism - and, well, it really does get complicated, said Tielemans, who now works as a lobbyist for the pro-natural gas International Union of Operating Engineers.

"This is a kind of 'high-risk, low-reward' situation to take a strong position one way or another," he said. "I don't see a winning position to take that doesn't take with a lot of peril for the NDP."

Martyn Brown, a political commentator and former chief of staff to B.C. Liberal premier Gordon Campbell, argues Singh should take a firm and clear position on such an important matter.

"He's trying to be cautious. He's trying not to offend John Horgan and the B.C. NDP, but he's got to stake a claim," Brown said. "Singh really has to drop back and say this is about (Indigenous) title and rights."

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Others are certainly saying that. Saganash, a residential school survivor who represented a northern Quebec riding for the NDP from 2011 until last year, has posted pointed criticism of Horgan on social media. In one post, he compared Horgan to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for being "all talk, no action" on Indigenous reconciliation. The post included the hashtag #BCMovingOnColonialPath.

Svend Robinson, who was a New Democrat member of Parliament from B.C. for 25 years, told the Star he is disappointed in Singh's lack of a position on the pipeline. He argued the federal NDP's opposition to fracking - the controversial process that will provide natural gas for the new pipeline - should spur Singh to denounce the project.

On top of that, he said, building the pipeline without the consent of Indigenous nations breaks with the rights the NDP fought to include in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Meanwhile, in Singh's own caucus on Parliament Hill, newly elected Winnipeg Centre MP Leah Gazan told the Star this week that construction of the pipeline should be stopped unless the province and company building it have the "free, prior and informed consent" of hereditary chiefs that is called for in the UN declaration.

She pointed to court rulings that uphold Wet'suwet'en title over the nation's traditional territory, and said she agrees with statements by the B.C. Human Rights Commissioner and UN Committee to End Racial Discrimination, which have recently called for construction to halt unless there's consent from affected nations.

"They're saying until there is really demonstrated free, prior and informed consent of all parties involved, we need to halt what we're doing and let people figure it out before we proceed," Gazan said.

For Brown, Singh and the NDP risk losing political ground to the Green party unless they take an firmer official stand against the pipeline. "As concerns about climate action grow, the Greens are going to be the winners on all that," he said. "Singh looks very weak ... by sitting on the fence, vacillating, trying to appeal to all sides."

Paul Manly, the Green MP who defeated the NDP to win his seat in Nanaimo last year, has said the B.C. NDP's support for the natural gas industry has been a "wedge issue" that benefits the Greens.

On Coastal GasLink, Manly argues the NDP is betraying its own principles by allowing the pipeline to be built over the objections of Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs. Horgan said this month that the bill only applies on future projects.

There is, however, the matter of the elected band councils along the pipeline route, 20 of which have signed benefit agreements in support of the project, Tieleman said. The pipeline is also already under construction, with a recently renewed court injunction to allow the RCMP to once again clear demonstrators from blocking progress. Last year, 14 demonstrators were arrested when police cleared a blockade leading to a work site.

With such a fraught - and yes, complicated - situation, Tieleman said Singh is making the best strategic move for the moment: not really making one.

"He's clear where he stands - it's that he's not taking a position," Tieleman said. "That's sometimes what you have to do in politics."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Should B.C. build pipeline? Don't ask Singh; NDP leader has refused to take official position on controversial project

Subject: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (90%); INDIGENOUS PEOPLES LAW (90%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (89%); ENERGY & UTILITY REGULATION & POLICY (78%); OIL & GAS REGULATION & POLICY (78%); LOBBYING (77%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (77%); LEGISLATION (76%); POLITICAL & SOCIAL IDEOLOGIES (75%); UNITED NATIONS (75%); ENVIRONMENTALISM (72%); UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTIONS (70%); CONSTRUCTION DELAYS & STOPPAGES (68%); LABOR UNIONS (64%)

Industry: PIPELINE TRANSPORTATION (91%); OIL & GAS PIPELINE CONSTRUCTION (90%); NATURAL GAS (89%); NATURAL GAS PIPELINES (89%); NATURAL GAS PRODUCTS (89%); OIL & GAS FACILITIES (89%); ENERGY & UTILITY REGULATION & POLICY (78%); LIQUEFIED NATURAL GAS (78%); OIL & GAS INDUSTRY (78%); OIL & GAS REGULATION & POLICY (78%); CONSTRUCTION DELAYS & STOPPAGES (68%)

Geographic: OTTAWA, ON, CANADA (74%); QUEBEC, CANADA (78%); BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA (58%)

Load-Date: January 25, 2020

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